

Starting School: Who is Prepared?

Young Lives' Research on Children's Transition to First Grade in Peru

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Available from:
Young Lives
Department of International Development
University of Oxford
3 Mansfield Road
Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751
Fax: +44 (0)1865 281801
E-mail: younglives@younglives.org.uk
Web: www.younglives.org.uk

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Abstract

In recent years, a growing body of literature has pointed to the importance of children's experiences of preschool and first grade as foundational for success during the subsequent school years. However, most of this research has been carried out in industrialised countries and has paid little attention to developing countries. This paper therefore seeks to contribute to this area by paying attention to the Latin-American context, where repetition and drop-out rates tend to be high, and taking as a case study an Andean country characterised by cultural diversity. Young Lives in Peru has conducted qualitative research on a subsample of four communities throughout the country, which represent different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. This paper describes findings in relation to data generated on the preparedness of schools and teachers for facilitating transition to first grade; parents' perspectives on early schooling; how much information they have on the transition; and the ways in which children experience this transition. In this way, the research shows how childhood is represented and experienced during early childhood transitions and across different domains (home, school, community). A mixed method approach was used, combining interviews with parents, teachers and children; participatory techniques with children; home and community observations; and classroom observation at preschool and primary levels.

Acknowledgements

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The Authors

Patricia Ames is an anthropologist with a PhD in Anthropology of Education at the University of London. She leads the Young Lives qualitative team in Peru. Currently she is a researcher at the *Instituto de Estudios Peruanos* (IEP) and lecturer at the Catholic University of Peru. Her research has focused on rural education, addressing issues of power, gender inequalities, ethnicity and multigrade teaching in rural areas, as well as topics related to childhood and socialisation, and literacy as social practice. In 2006, Patricia Ames was visiting professor at the Summer Institute in Language, Culture and Teaching in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at York University, Canada.

Vanessa Rojas has a Bachelor's Degree in Anthropology and a master's degree in Political Science from the Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru. Her work has focused on anthropology of education. Currently, she is working as a research assistant on qualitative aspects of Young Lives research in Peru.

Tamia Portugal has a BA in Anthropology from Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru. She is a senior researcher at GRADE, Lima

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of international literature has highlighted the importance of children's experience during the first grade as a foundation for success during subsequent school years, making this period more significant than any other (Entwistle and Alexander 1998; Ensminger and Slusarcick 1992; Entwistle and Hayduk 1988; Kerchkoff 1993; STC 2007; Ladd and Price 1987; Margetts 2002). More specifically, the transition to first grade seems to be key to this process, since children who adapt better to first grade tend to show a better performance in the following years than those who do not. There is also evidence showing that children who have access to preschool education are more likely to experience a successful transition to first grade (Margetts 1999; Rodríguez 2000; Le Roux 2002; STC 2003; STC 2004).

This paper explores the beginning of school life within the framework elaborated around the concept of transition. Currently, the study of transition processes is considered to be central to an understanding of children's experiences and well-being. Although used in a variety of senses, 'one generic definition would be that transitions are key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course' (Vogler et al. 2008). Transitions therefore refer to diverse events, including (but not solely confined to) educational events that have become a common experience for millions of children even in developing countries. The transition to first grade is conceptualised here as a process which starts months before and continues months after the first day of schooling, in the sense that previous experience (preschool or being at home, for example) influences the first days and weeks of school, and the effects of these days continue through the following weeks and months.

Although the discussion around early childhood transitions is relatively scarce in Latin America, it is a topic of great relevance in this context. During the 1990s, an increasing awareness of the importance of early years experience arose when it was found that the highest rates of repetition occur in first grade: at the beginning of that decade, 42 per cent of Latin-American children enrolled in first grade repeated the grade, whilst the average in primary school was 29 per cent. Repetition rates varied among countries but the highest rate was at first grade. To provide a few examples, in Ecuador in 1990, 28 per cent of children in first grade repeated in comparison to the average 15 per cent repetition rate in primary school; in Peru in 1992, 24 per cent of children in first grade repeated whilst 10 per cent dropped out; in Colombia, some departments showed a repetition rate of over 20 per cent at first grade. One decade later, most countries in Latin America show a repetition rate in first grade of around 10 to 15 per cent, although Brazil and Guatemala show a higher rate at 29 per cent and 27 per cent respectively.¹ Failure in first grade is also recognised as a global problem in developing countries which prevents many children from successfully completing their primary education (Arnold et al. 2007).

The finding that the highest repetition rates in the educational system take place at the very beginning of primary school highlights the importance of these early years and the need to focus initiatives here, as well as adding to the increasing evidence stressing how key these years are to human development (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007). Quality Early Childhood

1 Sources: Sistema Integrado de Indicadores Sociales del Ecuador (2000) at http://www.eumed.net/libros/2005/gcc/2f.htm#_ftn5; Ministerio de Educación – Perú (1993); UNESCO (2006) Education for All - Global Monitoring Report 2006.

Education and Care (ECEC) services, including different forms of preschool education, are increasingly recognised as a necessary and strategic investment for most countries. Studies in the developing world in the last years have shown the benefits of ECEC programmes in improving children's school trajectories (Arnold et al. 2007) and developing their full potential (Engle et al. 2007).

Despite all the above, there has been little research within Latin America in general and Peru in particular regarding the transition to first grade. There is some evidence in the available literature that children's educational outcomes in first grade are highly correlated with their preschool experience and the type of preschool they attended (Cueto and Diaz 1999). Some linguistic and anthropological studies, without focusing specifically on this transition, have nevertheless pointed to the cultural discontinuities children's experiences between home and school in culturally diverse contexts, which may impact specially when starting school (Uccelli 1996; Zavala 2005; Ames 2004).

Transition to primary school has been often associated with a discussion of 'readiness', which was initially conceptualised in terms of a set of predetermined physical, social and cognitive skills children must possess to fulfill school requirements (Woodhead and Moss 2007; Arnold et al. 2007). Repetition of first grade has thus been explained in terms of inadequate preparation for school, which is affected by poverty, malnutrition, home learning environment and access to ECEC services.

However, a critical move has started to claim that schools must also be ready for children, offering them a quality service that takes into account their characteristics and rights (Myers and Landers 1989; Woodhead and Moss 2007; OECD 2006). Thus, a more up-to-date understanding of readiness stresses that this concept is best understood as 'the match between the child and the institutions that serve the child' and requires the participation of families, schools and communities (Woodhead and Moss 2007: 13).

More research is needed to better understand children's experiences when starting school, due to its importance for their school trajectory and their development in general. The main adults involved in conducting and supporting this process, such as parents and teachers, are also key agents in providing children with the necessary support and understanding (or not) to progress through it. It is important also to consider different socioeconomic and cultural factors that may affect service provision and other aspects of the transition experience.

In order to contribute to this line of research, the Young Lives project in Peru conducted in-depth qualitative research during 2007 and 2008. Young Lives is a 15 year longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam. Two cohorts in each country are being studied in detail. These comprise 2,000 children born in 2000/1 (the 'Younger Cohort') and 1,000 children born in 1994/5 (the 'Older Cohort'). These cohorts were first studied through surveys in 2002, and again in 2006/7, with plans to follow up the full sample again in 2009 and to carry out further rounds of data collection through to 2015. In-depth qualitative research was conducted in two rounds in 2007 and 2008 with a subsample of children from both cohorts.

This paper presents the results of the first phase of the qualitative research, carried out in 2007 on a subsample of children from the Younger Cohort in four different districts in Peru. The paper addresses the following questions: a) how well prepared are preschools, primary schools and their teachers to facilitate transition to first grade; b) how much information do parents have about this process and what are their perspectives; and c) in what ways do children experience this transition.

Thus, in relation to schools and teachers, we inquire as to the ways in which preschool and first grade teachers and schools interact and exchange information; types of resource (material, organisational and intellectual) designed to support teaching in the first grade and their availability; and the impact which teachers' training, attitudes and ideas have on this transition. This constitutes the first section of the paper. The second section addresses parents' perspectives on early education and the information they have on early educational transitions as the main focus of inquiry. In the third section, children are questioned on their perceptions of this transition, their likes and dislikes and the contrasts they identify between preschool and primary school. We also examine other activities children engage in along with 'going to school' to help put all these perceptions in context.

In addition to these three questions, the study also inquires about differences in experiences of transition in urban and rural contexts, in indigenous and non-indigenous settings and in terms of gender. This comparative approach is visible in the methodological design of the study, which is presented below. Even within each context, there is a range of individual variation according to several variables such as gender, family size, birth order, mother's education, etc. Taking this into account, the study acknowledges the diversity of experiences in early childhood despite the increasingly common step most children in the continent are sharing: starting school.

1.1 Sample and methodology

The full Young Lives sample is pro-poor, and thus the richest 5 per cent of the population have been excluded. Approximately 75 per cent of sample sites are considered poor and 25 per cent non-poor according to the most recent poverty map available when the survey started (Escobal et al. 2008). The full sample is distributed across 20 sites, corresponding to districts. The qualitative research was carried out in four of these. These sites contrast in terms of area of residence (rural/urban); geographical location (Coast, Andes, Amazon); poverty (poor and non-poor); presence or absence of indigenous population; and degree of impact of recent political violence (post-conflict areas). In each district we base our work in one community, but in several cases we have to visit neighbouring communities and several schools. Communities and districts remain anonymous, but the name of the province is indicated. The communities (named after the province) where the subsample is located are briefly described below:

- *Rioja* is a rural community settled in the Upper Amazon, in the region of San Martin, located in the north of the country. The village is ten minutes by car from the district capital, about one hour from the provincial capital and three to four hours from the regional capital. The *Carretera Marginal*, an important highway connecting several provinces and regions, passes through the village. The village, like most of the region, is populated largely by Spanish-speaking Andean immigrants, but there are also neighbouring villages inhabited by the indigenous Awajun population. The village has about 1,673 inhabitants, dedicated mainly to agriculture (coffee) and cattle raising. Basic services in the village include piped water but no sewage system, and electricity did not arrive until August 2007. There is a preschool, primary and secondary school available in the village as well as a health post. Two other neighbouring villages were visited in this district. One is located next to Rioja, about five minutes by car. It is smaller than Rioja, with about 183 households. It has a preschool and a primary school, but not a secondary school, and similar services: piped water and latrines; electricity was about to be installed in August 2007. The other village is even smaller (about 40 households) and is not along the road but

within the forest. There is no preschool, but a PRONOEI (*Programa No Escolarizado de Educación Inicial* - a non-formal, community preschool programme), and a multigrade school with two teachers for the six grades of primary school. There is no health service in the village, neither piped water, sewage nor electricity.

- *Andahuaylas* is a peasant community located in the southern highlands of Peru, with lands between 3,000 and 3,500 metres in altitude, in one of the poorest regions of the country, Apurímac. The distance by car to the village from the district capital is about 30 minutes and it is 45 minutes from the provincial capital. The road that connects the latter with the regional capital passes through the village after about eight hours in driving time. Houses are dispersed through the hills in which the farming areas are located. The village is inhabited by the Quechua indigenous population. There are about 2,014 inhabitants grouped into 335 households. The population is dedicated mostly to agriculture (potatoes and corn) and cattle raising only as a secondary activity. Basic services available are piped water, electricity and latrines (the latter only in 40 households). The village has a preschool, primary and secondary school, as well as four community centres for day care (*Wawa Wasí*), one PRONOEI and a public health post. The region had suffered seriously from the political violence in the country between 1980 and 1992 and can certainly be considered a post-conflict area.
- *San Román* is a city in the southern Andes, at about 4,000 meters of altitude, in the region of Puno. It represents the economic and commercial centre of the region. The city is inhabited not only by Spanish-speaking people, but also by members of the two main indigenous groups in the Andes: Quechua and, especially, Aymara. Much of the population is of rural origin and the people keep their links with their birthplaces. Here we worked in four neighbourhoods, the biggest of which has about 3,000 households (15,000 inhabitants) and the smallest 143 households and 715 inhabitants. The population is dedicated to formal and informal trade, commerce and the textile industry. In addition to the formal and informal trade, the city is known for the existence of two highly profitable (although illegal) activities carried out by its inhabitants: drug dealing and smuggling. As an urban settlement, there is electricity, piped water and sewage, as well as telephone and internet in the four communities. However, only a few streets are paved, most are not. There is a public preschool and a public primary school in the main neighbourhood, as well as some private schools, a regional hospital and a Recreational Park. Secondary schools are available in other nearby neighbourhoods.
- *Lima 3* is also an urban settlement, located in the southern part of Lima, the national capital. The main neighbourhood we visited has about 1,118 households (7,825 people), but some children attend school in the adjacent neighbourhood, so we also include this in the study. Lima 3 is located in one of the districts founded through invasions of the desert hills surrounding the city, which started back in the 1950s. Today, the district has about 350,000 inhabitants, making it one of the most populous in the capital city. The neighbourhoods are inhabited by people who come from all over the country and new generations born in Lima. Inhabitants are dedicated to a variety of economic activities, from informal trade to teaching. As an urban settlement, there is electricity, piped water, sewage, as well as telephone and internet services. Most streets are paved, but some are not. There are several schools in these and the surrounding neighbourhoods, including public and private preschools, primary schools and secondary schools, as well as one *Wawa Wasí*, PRONOEIs, a vocational centre and an academy preparing for university admission. There is also a health centre.

Since we visited more than one community per site in most cases, we also visited more than one school and classroom per site. Some communities have only one school but two classrooms of the same grade, others have more than one school and only one classroom per grade. Table 1 summarizes the number of schools, classrooms and communities visited.

Table 1. *Schools, classrooms and communities visited*

Site	# of communities	# of schools	# of preschool classrooms	# of 1st grade classrooms	# of 2nd grade classrooms ²
Rioja	3	4	2	2	
Andahuaylas 1		1	1	2	
San Román 4	4	3	1	1	1
Lima 3	2	4	1	2	1
Total	10	12	5	7	2

In each district we worked with a subsample of the main Young Lives sample. The selected subsample includes six children from the Younger Cohort from each site, totalling 24 children, half boys and half girls, half rural and half urban, 25 per cent indigenous and 75 per cent non-indigenous. Here ethnicity is defined narrowly, taking into account mother tongue as declared in the household survey. The children were randomly selected and we found out that, of the 24, only six (25 per cent) were already 6 years old at the time of fieldwork, and the rest were 5 years old. Thus we expected that about 75 per cent of the sample would be still in preschool (or at home), since the mandatory age for starting primary school is six years old. However, ten children were already attending school, 12 were in preschool and two were at home waiting to start first grade the next year (beginning first grade early is an issue we'll discuss when looking at school organisational arrangements). Thus, all but two children in the sample were enrolled in school. This is consistent with the overall sample, which shows an enrolment rate of 78 per cent.³

We approach research with children, their caregivers and parents based on a mixed method approach (Clark and Moss 2001; Dockett and Perry 2005) that combines interviewing parents (24), teachers (12) and children (24), using participatory techniques with children and doing classroom observation at preschool (five classrooms) and primary levels (seven classrooms). Similar methodology was applied in all four of the countries participating in the project (Crivello et al. 2007, forthcoming). Data from the two previous surveys applied to the broader sample of Young Lives children (in 2002 and 2006) was also used to complement the analysis.

1.2 Early childhood and primary education in Peru

In Peru, although the gross enrolment rate for primary education is almost universal (97 per cent), this is not the case in preschool and secondary school (67 per cent and 86 per cent respectively), although both are also considered to be part of a basic education.⁴ Moreover, recent debates question the quality of educational provision and outcomes. The educational

2 These classrooms were visited for two special circumstances: first, one of the children has been promoted from preschool to second grade since he was especially bright; second, one of the children was enrolled in preschool but due to low enrolment in his classroom, he takes his lesson with the second grade class.

3 Due to the age of the Younger Cohort children (four to five years old), most of them were still in preschool at the time of the survey but were already enrolled in primary school at the time of our visit, a year later, and thus this percentage may be higher now.

4 Source: Ministry of Education (2007) <http://escale.minedu.gob.pe>

system offers basic education from 3 to 16 years old (although preschool is only compulsory at 5 years old). Table 2 shows some key features of the structure of the educational system.

Table 2. *Data on the structure of and enrolment in the Peruvian educational system*

Educational level	Normative age	Number of compulsory years	Enrolment	% women in relation to absolute enrolment	% enrolment in private education against total enrolment
Preschool	0-2 ⁵	0	nd	nd	nd
	3-5	1	1,065,361	50	16
Primary	6-11	6	4,283,046	49	14
Secondary	12-16	5	2,539,682	48	nd

Source: Compendio Mundial de la Educación 2005. UNESCO-UIS

Preschool education from 3 to 5 is offered in two ways: formal preschools (similar to kindergarten) and non-formal, community-based programmes, called PRONOEI. The main difference between the two services is that whilst preschools have a certified preschool teacher, PRONOEIs have an 'animator', usually a woman from the community who is trained by a preschool teacher in charge of about five to ten animators. The community provides the building and furniture for this programme. PRONOEIs are located in smaller villages where there are less than 30 children enrolled at preschool, although they are also found in poor urban areas and are a cheaper alternative to formal preschools.

Currently, basic education includes provision for children under 2 years old by the Ministry of Education. There is also another important Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programme run by the Ministry of Women and Social Development, which operates in community-based day care centres for children up to 3 years old. However, the degree of access that young children have to ECEC services is still highly limited: Only 4 per cent of children up to 2 years old have access to care services, whilst 59.5 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 have access to preschool education (MED 2007). Thus, a significant proportion of children reach the age of 6 with no educational experience before their enrolment in first grade. Due to the fact that the highest repetition rates were found in the first grade at the beginning of 1990s (24 per cent), the Ministry of Education banned repetition of this grade and introduced automatic promotion in 1995. Repetition rates dropped to 5 per cent. However, there has been no assessment of how this has impacted on experiences at first grade and whether educational quality in this grade has improved or not. Moreover, repetition rates in the second and third grades increased slightly in the subsequent years, indicating that rather than solving the problem, this measure may be just postponing it (Guadalupe et al. 2002).

Increasing awareness of the challenges posed by the above situation has led to the prioritising of early childhood, specifically in the age range 0-5, in several policy frameworks (such as the National Plan of Action for Childhood and Adolescence 2002-2010 [PNIA] and the National Education Project 2006-2021 [PEN]), as well as several actions to improve the quality of primary education in the last decade. The curriculum reform in the 1990s acknowledged the importance of this early transition by making the last year of preschool and the first two years of primary school the first curriculum cycle, and calling for an 'articulation'

5 This age group was included as part of Basic Education in 2006.

or curricular continuum between preschool and primary school. This initiative, however, was hardly put into practice in schools and classrooms as we will see later in this paper. Last National Curriculum design (launched in 2006 and then modified in 2008) discontinued this proposed articulation, but included education from 0 to 2 years and from 3 to 5 as the first and second cycle, respectively, of basic education.

However, the importance of first grade and the beginning of primary school has again been highlighted in the educational and policy agenda: the National Education Project (PEN 2006) recommends some specific measures for this phase, such as special training for preschool and first grade teachers, acknowledging the importance of continuity and communication during these early years. Nevertheless these measures have not yet been implemented, despite the current national policy of training teachers (*Programa Nacional de Formación y Capacitación Docente* [PRONACAF]).

2. How well prepared are schools and teachers to facilitate transition to first grade?

Although it is common to ask how ready are children to begin school, international debates increasingly point to the equally important question of how ready schools are for children (Woodhead and Moss 2007; Arnold et al. 2007; Save the Children US 2007; OECD 2006; Myers 1990). Thus, we started by asking the following questions: is the school well prepared for transitions? how do schools support children in these transitions? are there special arrangements in place for the attendance of first grade? To answer these questions, we focus our attention on different aspects of school transitions highlighted by a number of studies, such as:

- Availability and access to educational services
- Communication and exchange between preschool and primary school teachers, as well as between teachers and parents
- School organisational arrangements that affect transitions
- Teacher training for transitions
- School material resources and overall quality of school buildings and materials.

2.1 Increased availability and access

Availability and access to educational services have improved greatly in recent years, especially regarding preschool education. Indeed, between 1998 and 2006, the number of preschools (both formal and non-formal) has increased by 20 per cent. Formal preschools show a higher growth (27 per cent) than non-formal ones (14 per cent), whilst primary schools only grew by 9 per cent (see table 3) but showed almost universal enrolment since the end of the 1990s (MED 2007).

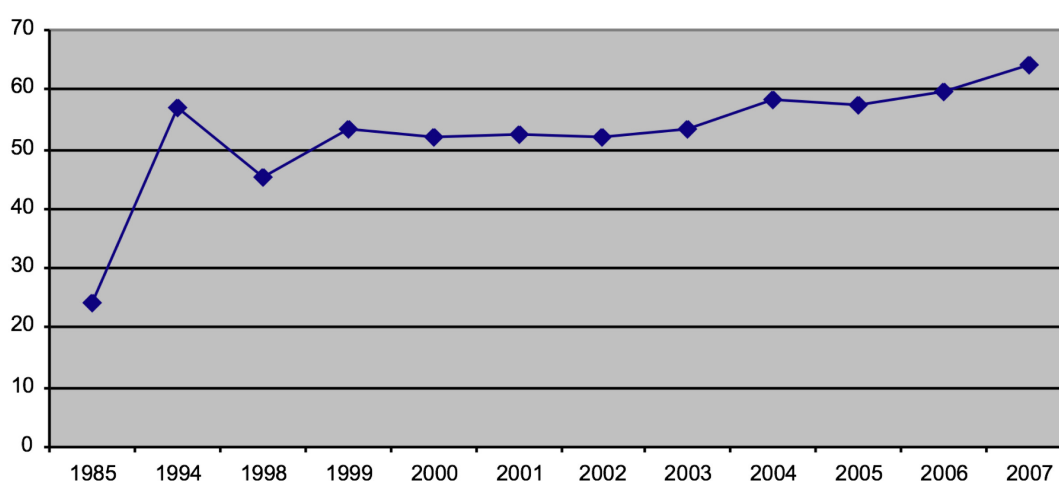
Table 3. *Increase in the number of schools 1998-2006 by type*

School	1998	2006	% increase
Preschool	31140	37440	20%
Formal Preschool	14812	18794	27%
Non-formal preschool	16328	18646	14%
Primary school	32,734	35,579	9%

Source: ESCALE – Estadística de la Calidad Educativa. Ministerio de Educación.

This expansion allowed for greater access and enrolment in preschool has been rising steadily, as shown in Graph 1. Thus, for example, in 1985 only 26.6 per cent of children between 3 to 5 years old were enrolled in school (MED 2005); twenty years later this percentage was 66.6 per cent (MED 2007), showing a significant growth in the last two decades.

Graph 1. *Evolution of preschool enrolment among children 3-5 years old 1985-2007*



This situation was observable in the places we visited: in all but two of the communities under study there was preschool, primary and secondary education available for children living within the village at a short walking distance. The two communities where there was no secondary school were rural (next to Rioja), and were located about 30 minutes walk from a village that has one. One of these two communities had a PRONOEI instead of a formal preschool. In the urban areas visited, although not all levels of education were necessarily available in the same neighbourhood, these services were nevertheless accessible in a nearby neighbourhood and within walking distance.

However, although we found a preschool service in every visited community within our subsample, this is not always the case. In contrast to primary school, which is available in 93 per cent of the communities in the whole sample (and is located nearby for a further 5 per cent), formal preschool is available only in 76 per cent of them, and is located nearby for another 13 per cent. However, as we will see in the next section, 'nearby' may be not enough for young children to attend. Non-formal preschool (PRONOEI) is available in 50 per cent of the communities within the sample, and may be in the same area as formal preschools, especially in urban areas. These general figures show that the availability of preschool services is still lower than primary education services. However, these figures are lower in

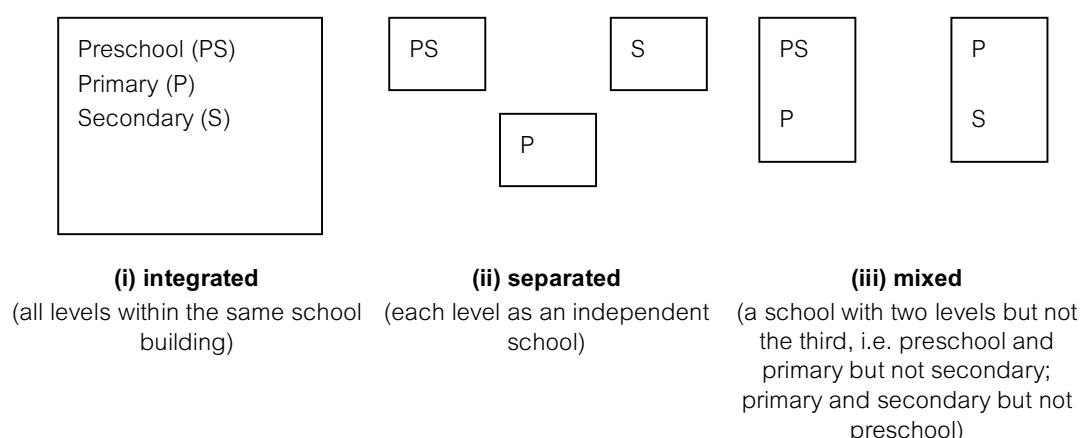
rural areas, where patterns of residence are dispersed and settlements are smaller. This influences parents' decisions regarding the enrolment of young children, as we will see later in more detail. Also, different social groups have varying access to preschool services of diverse quality (an issue explored in more detail in Woodhead et al., forthcoming).

While availability of school provision has improved in general, there are still major challenges to be confronted at policy level, especially those needed to ensure institutional coordination and collaboration, and continuity of experience for children as they progress from one type of school to another. This is a major focus for this paper, as we will see next.

2.2 Institutional coordination and communication between preschool and primary school teachers

The provision of educational services in Peru is organised in a variety of ways, as shown in Diagram 1:

Diagram 1: *Ways to organise educational provision at different levels*



Within our sample we have found all of the situations presented in Diagram 1. In the rural communities, for example, preschool, primary and secondary schools have separate buildings (usually created at different times, and usually with the preschool as the newest service). They are either very close to one another, or separated by a short walking distance. Each school responds to a different head teacher. All provision is public and only one school of each type is available in a given area.

In urban areas, it was more common to find preschools and primary schools together, with secondary schools built separately. However there are also primary and secondary schools combined and independent preschools. There is a greater variety of educational pathways on offer, and we found great variation in both public and private schools in terms of size and characteristics.

The issue of integration or separation is highly relevant in regard to early transitions. Literature suggests that when preschool and primary school are within the same school, it may ease the transition process (Entwistle and Alexander 1998; OECD 2001, 2006), since children are more familiar with the school itself. However, even when in the same school building, preschool and primary levels work in different spaces and in very different ways. Children, as well as parents and teachers, are very aware of this.

From the data collected it can be said that having preschool and primary levels working in the same school seems to contribute somewhat to the communication and exchange between

teachers. Where preschool and primary are two separate schools, communication between teachers of different levels is almost nonexistent. This is true not only in urban communities, where pre- and primary schools may be far from each other, and children from different preschools end up in different primary schools, but also in small rural communities, where they are very close to each other. In most cases, preschool teachers are not aware of who will teach their children the following year. Similarly, first grade teachers do not know the children who are to be their students next year, reflecting the disconnection between these two levels. We found only one case in a small and remote rural community where this situation was different: the community teacher in charge of preschool (PRONOEI) worked closely with the first grade teacher, and the latter got to know her future students. In all the other classrooms we visited, however, this did not occur. The physical separation between preschool and primary school did not allow for informal meetings and exchange, and no formal meetings were organised between teachers from these two institutions.

Thus, communication between preschool and primary teachers was reported only in one rural village (between PRONOEI and school) and in three (integrated) urban schools (one public, two private). However, this communication consisted mainly of an informal exchange of information between teachers about the progress of their children and did not involve any kind of coordination for instructional or other types of activity. The only documentation that is exchanged between preschool and primary school is the enrolment card, with general basic data, mostly for administrative purposes. No pedagogical or otherwise relevant information about the children's abilities, characteristics or needs is passed from one level to another. For this reason, even the informal exchange of information reported above is important. It is intriguing that such communication does not happen in more schools, especially given the fact that teachers express a positive opinion regarding the usefulness of such communication:

I think perhaps it should be mandatory, that exchange with the first grade teacher, so we know how our children are doing, how they are progressing. And also they [first grade teachers] get to know how they were [at preschool]. We can tell them about the children, what their characteristics are. (*Lucia, Preschool teacher, Andahuaylas*)

It is a basic thing we have to do, to work in coordination. I mean, preschool, first and second grade – we need to coordinate our work. A work of transition is a way of putting it, isn't it? [...] We are not working in coordination with the preschool at the moment, but we should, shouldn't we? We should visit them, they should visit us; I don't know. We should manage some capacities together, because they also manage strategy, don't they? It is a sudden change for them [children] and it should not be like that. (*Norma, First grade teacher, Andahuaylas*)

It is possible that the lack of institutional arrangements for fostering this type of communication prevents many teachers from, for example, promoting regular meetings between teachers to discuss transition among children or particular issues regarding children who are in this process. It is also possible that the autonomy of each school keeps teachers apart, as well as the physical distance in urban areas. There are also different languages and conceptions about each level, as well a different status for teachers in each level, that may prevent a more collaborative approach:

[We] preschool teachers are looked down on, because they [primary teachers] don't think that children learn effectively through play. They think that we play because we are lazy. But it is not like that, play is important for children. They develop physically and psychologically, they feel good, forget their problems and try to feel joy. (*Lucia, Preschool teacher, Andahuaylas*)

This last quotation also refers to different philosophies and approaches that are present at different levels of preschool and primary: the importance of play and a child-centered approach is highlighted in preschool, whilst a more teacher-directed and subject-based approach is more common in primary school, despite efforts to introduce a more child-centred approach. One teacher aptly points out the need for continuity from preschool to primary, and how this was indeed integrated into the curriculum reform of the 1990s:

Some time ago there was a lot of talk about linkage between preschool and primary school, but it is not happening: preschool goes one way and primary school goes another. It would be good to do some team work with teachers from preschool and first grade teachers from primary school, don't you think? (*Sara, Preschool teacher, San Román*)

Thus, there was a sort of legal framework that promoted linkage and collaboration between different levels and teachers (see also introductory section). There is also certain agreement on this among teachers. However, in practice, this linkage, communication and exchange rarely occurs. There are no institutional arrangements that foster a deliberate process of transition between preschool and first grade, much less between home and first grade, as we will see in next the section. Surprisingly, it is only in the non-formal preschool (PRONOEI) where the community facilitator is aware of the need to do something to smooth the transition from home to preschool and to try to liaise with the first grade teacher so she and the children get to know each other beforehand. In most of the schools we visited, there were no institutional arrangements to promote transition explicitly (such as visits from preschool children to first grade classrooms, welcome activities during the first week of first grade, meetings with parents to advise on the transition process, etc.). However, some arrangements were indeed in place and impacted indirectly upon the process of transition.

2.3 Organisational arrangements affecting transitions: Assignment of teachers

One such arrangement is the assignation of the teacher for first grade. This is usually the decision of the head teacher, but different schools have different arrangements in place. The most common arrangement we found is that one teacher is assigned a class at first grade who she continues to instruct through all primary grades until sixth grade, when students graduate from primary school. After that, the teacher starts again with a new group of first graders. As the teacher has spent the last years of her career working with older children, it can be difficult for some to return to working with small children. Others think this arrangement is not so useful and advocate a more specialised organisation, with designated teachers working with the lower grades (first and second) on a permanent basis, with others working with intermediate (third and fourth) and upper grades (fifth and sixth):

Children are with me from first grade. All sixth grade classrooms (A, B, C) are like that, with the same teacher. It is the first group to be managed like this. Before, there was a teacher in charge of every phase: one teacher took first and second grade, and then she went back to first grade. Another teacher taught third and fourth and I used to teach in fifth and sixth. But then the school changed to this scheme [...] I do think it is better by phases, because you have to be aware of different things and it is better if you specialise in one phase, for example fifth grade, and keep repeating that. You can give more because you gain experience year after year. But if you go from sixth to first grade it is very different, you have to get used to new things. It is like a rupture because you have to teach reading and writing and you have to read new stuff. (*Carmen, Sixth grade teacher, Lima*)

Organisation by phases, as this teacher advocates, was not found in any of the schools we visited, but is known to be used in other schools, as was the case in the past for the school reported. The curriculum contents are also organised by phases (cycles) so this option makes sense in terms of curricular organisation. The National Educational Project also believes primary education must be composed of three separate phases and that the first especially requires special training. Schools, however, seem to be working to a different logic. It is also worth noting that no teachers at any school visited mentioned special criteria for selecting first grade teachers. It is a 'turn' everybody has to go through and no special abilities or training are required to be appointed to this grade. In some cases, it is the newcomer who is assigned to first grade.⁶

2.4 Organisational arrangements affecting transitions: Enrolment of students

Another institutional arrangement that seems to have an impact on transition and constitutes a conflictive issue between preschool and primary school is the enrolment of children in first grade before the standard age. In Peru, children are supposed to start first grade at six years old, or if their sixth birthday is during the first half of the school year (before July 1st).

However, for different reasons, we found 5-year-old children already enrolled in first grade, especially in rural areas. In one community, this happened because the school wanted to get an additional teacher and tried to enroll all possible children in first grade to make up two classes. However, they did not get the additional teacher and ended up with 40 children, 15 of whom had not been enrolled in preschool. In another community, the school already had two teachers for first grade, and allowed enrolment of some children at 5 years old to keep the teacher's position, with 15 children enrolled in each class.

It is noticeable here that the main concern regarding enrolment decisions in first grade has to do more with the issue of getting or keeping a teacher instead of what works best for the children. An overpopulated classroom and the enrolment of children who were under age and without preschool experience were not necessarily the best outcomes for the children themselves (some teachers said it takes about three months to put children without preschool experience on a similar level to those who attended preschool, thus causing a considerable delay in progress for the whole group).

There is also a conflictive dimension in the practice of early acceptance and lack of requirement of preschool experience. Preschool teachers fight for greater enrolment in preschool and consider that, if the primary school is not demanding preschool as a mandatory requirement and accepts children before the mandatory age, it is working against the preschool:

Verónica: The problem is that in the primary school the teacher accepts children without preschool, and that creates a problem...

Julia: If the teacher, maybe at the beginning of the year, says, 'no, these children haven't gone through preschool', perhaps if they reject them, it would help to make parents conscious that it is necessary that the child go through preschool in order to be enrolled in first grade. But because they do not say anything, they accept, enrol, then the parents say, 'ok, if they are going to be accepted anyway, let's send them'.

⁶ This is the case of, for example, a new teacher in Lima. Also, in the multigrade school at Rioja, in previous years, the head teacher always took the upper grades and assigned the lower grades, including first, to the new teacher. From last year, and because her own daughter was in first grade, the head teacher took the lower grades for the first time.

Verónica: They say that if they are accepted in primary school, then why send them to preschool? (*Verónica and Julia, Preschool teachers, Rioja*)

These views express the tension between primary and preschool not only in terms of enrolment but also in the importance of each of these services. This tension is especially worrying if preschool education has not been firmly established as an important and necessary step among the population, since this could give the message that it is not necessary. The opposite message, that it should be a condition for entering primary school, depends on adequate and available provisions. Otherwise it will exclude children from more remote areas or regions from starting school on time. This is an issue particularly pertinent to rural areas.

2.5 Teacher training for transition

Although all but one of the interviewed teachers observed had had professional training to become teachers, none of them had special training for teaching first grade. For some, this was the first time they had taught this grade and for others, because of the institutional arrangements, it had happened after several years of working with older children, as explained above. Nevertheless, special training is neither requested nor provided. Only one (rural) teacher reported she got a three day course on reading comprehension, which was very useful for her. It seemed, however, to be a general course not specifically directed towards first grade teachers. On the other hand, only one teacher, in Andahuaylas, raised the issue of the need for further training to teach first grade. She described a self-support group she belongs to with first grade teachers from other schools, who meet together to plan lessons and elaborate materials. This is more likely to happen in situations in which the teacher lives in the city during the week, as is the case with this teacher. In the case of preschool teachers, only one of them, the community animator, reported special training to facilitate transition from home to preschool and some level of coordination with the first grade teacher. Formal teachers did not report special training to help 5-year-old children prepare for transition to school.

2.6 Teachers and parents: Communication and exchange

Communication and exchange between teachers and parents varies greatly among schools, but we have found in most cases that there is some interaction, either in individual encounters and/or in collective meetings. The main topics covered in this communication have to do with individual performance or behaviour problems. Specific dialogue about transitions (characteristics, demands and ways to face them) is not reported. Other various topics may arise, such as specific guidance for hygiene and health, positive feedback, the importance of sending children to preschool or the broadening of educational aspirations. Topics vary according to specific situations. What is common is the kind of parents teachers look for: they want parents as allies, supporting and working with their children at home; parents who inquire after how their children are progressing; who express interest in their children's education and are able to provide support for the teacher when they need it.

Mrs Flora is very concerned about her children, she cares a lot, I see her that way. She comes to the school, she is asking about things [...] when we call her, she is here with us, always... parents are attentive to what happens to Fabricio, at least the mother. (*Norma, First grade teacher, Rural*)

She [Alejandro's mother] is supportive, yes. If I ask her to do me a favour, she does, she shows interest, she comes, she picks him up, she walks him to school, although they live nearby, she walks him to school, she asks me: how is he doing, teacher? Is he making progress? Can he already do the things? (*Verónica, Preschool teacher, rural*)

When parents do not show these characteristics in the way teachers expect, the latter express disappointment and tend to blame parents for being uninterested and responsible for their children's failure at school:

I only know the mother. To begin with, she is, her values are... irresponsibility, unpunctuality... but I can't tell him anything, it is the mother's fault. She brings him late, she brings him to me in any old clothes, his notebooks are... and sometimes she doesn't even send them, because he did not even do his homework. She apologises, 'Miss, I have to do this', she says. But this is not for me, it is for her son. The lady thinks that offering apologies is enough, but he is the one that is not going to learn, she does not work with him at home. So, I can work with him here, but if she does not work with him, does not help him, it is his mother's fault. She is very irresponsible and unpunctual.
(*Rosa, First grade teacher, Urban*)

In her interview, this mother recognized that she did not provide enough support to her boy at the beginning of first grade, since she had a lot of work to do at that time. However, she expressed genuine interest in her son's education and says she is supporting him more now. Her husband works in another city and thus she takes care of her boy alone, and lives also with her father and a brother. Teacher's perceptions seem not to acknowledge working mothers' realities and the circumstances they may be going through, but it is clear that when they do not perform as expected, negative images are quickly built against them. Parents, however, have their own views on early education which vary between sites, as the next section will show.

3. Parents' perspectives on early schooling: Attitudes, information and available trajectories

International literature suggests that to achieve quality services for early childhood education and care, it is necessary to involve parents and communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of these services (Save the Children 2007; OECD 2006). After all, parents are the ones to decide when, for how long and which of their children attend preschool services. Thus, the attitudes of parents and communities towards early schooling, the information parents receive about the transitions their children are experiencing and the trajectories available to them during their first years are major issues. This section addresses these concerns by paying attention to the overall attitude towards preschool education, which tends to be highly positive, but also presents criticism and differing attitudes towards preschool, as well as showing the almost invisible barriers still present in accessing preschool education. We also address the issue of how much information parents receive about early transitions and how they think they can support their children in this process. Finally we review the trajectories that our subsample of children follow and discuss parents' points of view on the different types of service available to them.

3.1 A positive note: Acknowledging the importance of preschool education

Preschool education is relatively new in this country, and given its recent expansion (summarised in the introduction), we expected to find mixed views among parents about preschool education. However, we found a much more widespread recognition of the importance of preschool than we anticipated. This was the case across both rural and urban areas. A first sign of this was the extent of access and enrolment within our subsample: 21 out of 24 households studied sent or send their children to preschool.

In general, caregivers express a positive view of preschool and see it as an important experience for their children. They see it as important especially as a way to facilitate adaptation to first grade and to primary school, and as a way to smooth the transition from home to school. Parents identify that children are not only introduced to the knowledge and skill sets they will need when entering primary education, but also to behaviours and relations with other children and adults.

She totally changed when she started school. It is not like if she stays at home. The preschool is really a help, she learns things; for example to do puzzles, vowels, and they teach how to behave progressively. (*Lupe's mother, Lima 3, Urban*)

When they go to preschool, they learn vowels, the alphabet, their hand becomes more adapted to writing, and they don't suffer so much at school. They can already write at least their name [...] They are also less shy, as they become used to their teacher and their classmates. (*Hugo's mother, Rioja, Rural*)

According to most parents, if children don't attend to preschool, they may 'suffer' when starting school: they are more likely to have difficulties in adapting to first grade, to perform poorly and even to show some delay in relation to their peers with preschool experience. They may repeat or drop out; they may feel intimidated when entering school or be scared of the teachers.

The children who don't go to preschool, they cry, suffer, they don't know even how to write 'o' (...) They come out of preschool learning, knowing the colours, what colour is this, what is a pencil, an eraser. The ones who stay at home, what can you teach them? From preschool they come out learning, and also being less shy. (*Gabriela's mother, Rioja, Rural*)

Preschool is therefore seen as a place where children may acquire knowledge that will be further developed at primary school, such as letters and numbers and skills necessary for writing and counting. In this sense, expectations of primary education are being taken as a reference point, and preschool is seen as a 'preparation for'. This reflects the power imbalance between these two educational services, where primary is seen as dominant in the schema of parents and as the benchmark to which to adapt (Woodhead and Moss 2007), even if this involves 'suffering'. However, preschool is also seen as a place to learn social skills, such as interpersonal communication, independence, how to establish relations with other children, make friends, defend oneself, and become less shy – abilities that will help in first grade but are much broader in nature. Here parents show their interest in the integral development of their children and it is clear they place value on preschool in itself and not just in relation to primary school.

3.2 Differing attitudes towards preschool education

Despite the overall positive attitude towards preschool education across all sites, a few parents in the Andean rural site were not so convinced about the value of preschool experience, although they do value primary education. One caregiver from Andahuaylas stated that preschool is mostly 'play'; that children do not learn there. Another expressed the view that 'true' learning happens at primary school, not in preschool. These statements may show that the longer presence of primary school in Andean communities has shaped conceptions of education in several ways, and that the (comparatively) new presence of preschool, with its different approach to learning, may mean that greater support and orientation should be delivered to families on its characteristics and advantages. It may also reflect the power imbalance between the two as discussed above. In any case, it is only a minority (three out of 21) who express this point of view. Furthermore, they send their children to preschool nonetheless.

However, it should be noted that it is only in the Quechua rural community in the Andes where half the caregivers agree that preschool education is important and half do not. Parents in this site also complain about preschool teachers, who have conflicts among themselves and are perceived as bad teachers, which also influences views of preschool generally. However, it is important to remember that in this community, children belong to an indigenous group and are part of everyday activities from a very young age, in a way that helps them to develop both their individual and collective identities.

Take Ana, for example, a 5-year-old who ably helps her grandmother with the cattle, walks alone from home to preschool, helps with cooking, laundry and cleaning, feeds her hens and guinea pigs and joins her mother in grazing the flock. Her mother does not consider preschool to be useful for her daughter, and thus would prefer for her to stay at home. But one can see that staying at home also involves learning for this little girl; learning skills quite different from those she will learn at school, but which are nonetheless useful for becoming a full member of her family, community and culture. This tension may be at the root of indigenous parents' resistance to preschool education (which is neither bilingual nor intercultural), although they have accepted the need for primary education and ultimately agree to send their children to preschool.⁷ Primary education is more strongly associated with the learning of Spanish and literacy, knowledge which is important for self-preservation in a literate, Spanish-speaking society, and for progressing in life; for becoming someone or somebody (Zavala 2002; Ames 2002).

3.3 Barriers to preschool education

On the other hand, three of the households we surveyed included children (all girls) who have not had preschool experience. Two are from the rural village in Rioja, and the main reason for not attending preschool is geographical access.

Belen is the only daughter of a separated young couple. She was living with her father, stepmother and younger sister during her preschool years in a remote village without preschool and thus did not have the chance to attend. Now she is back at her maternal grandmother's house, where she spent her first three years. Her mother has migrated for

⁷ Notably, the net enrolment ratio in preschool for the indigenous population is lower than the national average. Quechua people show a high enrolment rate among indigenous groups, with 48 per cent, whilst other Amazonian indigenous groups such as Ashaninkas and Aguarunas show a rate of 28 per cent (MED 2007).

work and her grandparents are her caregivers. They enrolled her in first grade when she was of the age to attend.

Carmen lives with her parents and a teenage sister, but her house is not close to the preschool. It is about 20 minutes walk along the highway from home to preschool. Her mother considers this to be too dangerous for a little girl walking alone and prefers her to stay at home until first grade. The mother has a positive attitude towards preschool but is concerned about the risks along the way and feels constrained since she and her husband have to go to the farming areas to work and cannot take Carmen to school. Nor can her older sister, who starts secondary school two hours earlier. The mother tries to teach her some basics at home, such as letters and numbers, and gives her 'homework' so she is more familiar with school routines. Carmen is keen to start first grade next year.

Geographical access and availability of services is an important issue for preschool education, especially considering the age of the children and the legitimate concerns parents may have about their safety. In the previous section we showed that, in the full sample, availability of preschool services is still lower than that of primary education services. In rural areas, availability of services and strategies to guarantee access are even more critical due to geographical characteristics and settlement patterns characterised by dispersion. If we check enrolment rates, we see that whilst 89 per cent of urban children in the overall sample are enrolled in preschool, only 73 per cent of rural children are.⁸

Within the full Young Lives sample it is interesting to note that, if rural children show a lower enrolment rate than urban children, it is rural girls who show the lowest enrolment rate of all groups (70 per cent), a trend also identified in national statistics, where rural girls show even a lower figure (52 per cent). It is therefore not mere coincidence that within our subsample, all the children with no preschool experience are girls. Rural girls' educational trajectories are especially prone to issues of age and delays: as several studies have shown (Montero 1995; Ames 2005; Oliart 2004; Montero 2006), rural girls who experience delays in their school trajectories (such as late entry to first grade or repetition during primary years) are more at risk of dropping out of primary school early or of completing only primary education without entering secondary school. This is expressed in a popular saying, 'the age overcomes them', which means that they have already reached an age and maturity status that conflicts with school demands.⁹ If more rural girls than any other group are entering school without preschool experience, which may cause delays or repetitions in their school trajectories, this will have important consequences for the probability of their finishing primary education and attending secondary school.¹⁰

The decision of rural parents to send their children to preschool is influenced by access to this particular service, but also by their attitudes towards preschool. As we have seen, a growing number of parents consider it important that their children attend preschool. In some

8 Gaps of enrolment in preschool in urban and rural areas are wider in national statistics: 72 per cent vs. 53 per cent net enrolment rate for urban and rural children respectively (MED 2007).

9 Indeed, older girls are in charge of several important domestic activities, from caring for siblings to cooking and cleaning. In addition, they participate more intensively in economic activities, such as grazing the flock, sowing and harvesting, and even the selling of agricultural products. Demands from home compete with school time, but also create a contrasting status, as they are grown up in one scenario and little girls in the other.

10 Despite the outstanding figures of almost universal primary school enrolment, it is already acknowledged that an important proportion of rural girls and teenagers remain excluded from the educational system and risk becoming functional illiterates. An expression of recognition of this problem is law 27558 for the promotion of rural girls' and (female) teenagers' education approved in 2003.

cases, the issue receives priority and influences family decisions. For example, a caregiver from the Older Cohort explained to us that she and her husband were living in the farming area when their children were little, far from the village. However, when the children turned 4 years old, they moved to the village so they could attend preschool. In this case, the value assigned to preschool experience strongly influenced parental decisions despite geographical limitations. This contrasts with the above two cases, where difficulties of geographical access outweighed the importance of preschool education. Thus, not only issues of access and availability but also attitudes and values in relation to preschool services are in play when it comes to whether or not these services are used.

The third case in which preschool enrolment did not take place is of an urban girl in San Román. Again, the primary reason for not attending is access, but in this instance it is also related to economics:

Cecilia is the youngest of eight siblings in an Aymara family of rural origin. Like her older siblings, she has not attended preschool but will be enrolled next year in first grade. Her mother explains that it is too costly for her to send her children to preschool, but considers they have to go to school. Also, she thinks her little girl is too young to go to preschool and the right age to go to school is six, to start first grade. Cecilia is afraid of school because of what she has heard about it from her older sisters. She thinks it is going to be difficult and that teachers may be mean and hit her. Her mother is aware of this but has decided that the girl is going to attend first grade next school year, whether she likes it or not.

Preschool education is free in public schools. However, there are several 'hidden costs', such as uniforms, school materials, contributions to parents' associations, contributions to school lunch, and other expenses which may be monetary or involve voluntary work such as cooking or cleaning. Teachers often complain about the lack of educational materials which they require to work (and which the government does not provide) and the difficulties of getting parents to buy these supplies, especially in rural and poor urban areas:

The building is ok, but our classroom needs improvement, a lot, because to work with learning corners requires a lot of materials. For example, for a reading corner, a library, with good books, newspapers, magazines, a comfortable place for them to sit, cushions or something like that, you know? For mathematics there should be games, puzzles. But we cannot do that because of economics. If we ask parents, they hardly give anything for enrolment. If we ask for something else, they claim against it. And we just try to do things. [...] The Ministry [of Education] does not provide anything. I heard they provide some learning materials for primary schools but for preschool they don't. I see private [preschools] with books, children paint, look, recognise, do, it eases the job [to have materials] and the child is more into it, right? But we have to make do with what we have [...] Asking the state does not work, it does not support us, and it has to come from the institution [school]. [...] Here we do not have much income, so we can't [provide enough materials]; we need to calculate all the things we need. (*Verónica, Rural preschool teacher, Rioja*)

Teachers also report that parents complain that preschools' list of materials is usually very expensive, even more so than in primary school. This may affect the decision on how many years they send their children to preschool, an issue we will address shortly. If preschool is seen as not so important or necessary, it is not worth investing so much in it. A caregiver from San Román explained that she only enrolled her son because of her older children, who insisted on it, and because of the certificate which would mean that he would not have

trouble in entering primary school. This statement makes it clear that she does not see preschool education as valuable in itself, as in the case of Cecilia's mother. This contrasts with the much stronger consensus we found in the capital city, in Lima 3, where all caregivers consider preschool education to be important. It may also show the importance of cultural background and educational experiences of mothers in relation to their attitudes towards preschool education. Once again, material constraints are intertwined with attitudes and values.

3.4 Differences in access to information and use of preschool services

As we have already seen, for most parents, preschool is an important step in becoming ready for first grade. However, there are differences between contexts, and an important one has to do with the time devoted to this preparation: in Lima we found only four children who had three years of preschool access. Half of the children (twelve of the twenty-four) had two years of preschool, five had only one year and three didn't receive any. This is also consistent with national statistics, which show lower enrolment rates for 3 and 4 year olds than for 5-year-old children, who show the highest enrolment rate in preschool. Thus, although parents may agree that preschool is important, and most children go to preschool at five years old (the mandatory age), not all sites necessarily agree on the need for an earlier and longer enrolment. This is due in part to the hidden costs associated with preschool enrolment which we referred to above and the perceived need (or not) for a more continuous educational experience.

In Lima, where attendance of preschool tends to be longer, mothers show more years of education (ten on average, with most having completed secondary education), and are non-poor. In contrast, in both rural communities, which are poor, mothers show little schooling: five years on average in the Amazon (fewer than a complete primary education) and two in the indigenous Andean village, with most mothers not having any education. The Andean city, despite being urban, is also populated by people of rural and indigenous origin and the average is seven years of education, though only half have completed secondary education and half have not even completed primary education.

It is also worth noting that in Lima alone did caregivers display some knowledge of the importance of the particular transition their children are experiencing in starting first grade. They also showed more awareness of their role in supporting the early years of schooling:

Interviewer: Do you think this stage [transition from preschool to first grade] is important?

Lupe's mother: Oh, yes. I know my girl needs good foundations in first and second grade, after that they go on their own, but first and second grade are very important. I do not have any problems with my daughter, because that is very important for me; it is the foundation to learn well later. The teacher always advises us, and asks us to make her study a couple of hours at home. Her sister supports us, they always study together.

Eva's mother: Yes, I agree. First and second grade are important because if they don't do them well, they don't do well later. But parents have to help at home too; we should not leave everything to the school. (*Urban mothers, group interview, Lima 3*)

Despite this informed and positive attitude, parents also acknowledge the conditions of their work (which mean being away from home for most of the day) prevent them from providing more support to their children, who stay at home with other relatives, such as grandparents.

In contrast, caregivers in the rural sites and in the Andean city are less explicit about this particular transition. They consider it important but see their role and support in more general terms: sending their children to school, feeding them well, giving them their school materials. Teachers sometimes interpret this as lack of interest in education, but parents do express a strong interest in education. However, they may vary in how they think of the support they are supposed to provide (see also Ames 2004).

[They may suffer] because they get homework they don't understand... but I will support him, you know son, you do it like this... The homework we know, isn't it? Up to the point I understand, sometimes we don't understand [...] [Also] in sending him early to school, clean, dressed, because they check the children [...] He will need a good feeding too, isn't it? For the child to go to school he must be well fed. Sometimes there is not enough, isn't it? [...] Clothes for my boy, all of that. (*Hugo's Mother, Rioja, Rural*)

Notebooks, pencils, his clothes, madame, his uniform, even his little shoes he will need, in those things I am going to support him [...] Mmm. Those things he will need [...] Ah, also his books, that he is going to need. (*Fabricio's mother, Andahuaylas, Rural*)

Indeed, it is clear from case studies that the caregivers in our sample are committed to providing a basic education for their children. Although it is still debatable whether preschool should be started at 3, 4 or 5 years old, or even if it is necessary at all, all agree primary school is a must and that children should attend. Moreover, they are enrolled in primary school at the mandatory age (6 years old) or earlier, which was not always the case (in the Andes some children used to start at older ages, when they were bigger or more mature according to their parents). Indeed, there is such a strong commitment to primary education that it is believed children should attend even if they don't want to. We have collected some testimonies from parents, teachers and children themselves explaining that if a child is scared or reluctant to go to school because the teacher punishes him for whatever reason, the parents also hits the child and makes him or her go back to school, even if it is against his/her will. 'It is for their own good', parents say, and children reiterate this when they are older. However, we wonder if a smoother mechanism for transition may ease the process and transform the experience into a much more gratifying one.

Interviewer: What do you say, how do you prepare children to go to preschool, how do you explain to them?

Hugo's mother: The first day you stay here with the teacher, she cares for him, makes him play. And they [children] stay until noon and then he goes home.

Interviewer: And what if he says, 'I don't want to go anymore'?

(*Mothers laugh a bit.*)

Hugo's mother: Then we should punish them.

(*Some laugh.*)

Interviewer: He has to go forcibly?

(*They laugh again.*) (*Collective interview with rural mothers, Rioja*)

Nicolás: When I entered the school I felt sad, because I did not know anybody. I felt sad for two days. Before going to school I felt sad, because I thought maybe teachers are bad. And they were. The teacher pulls our heads with chalk, he hits with the ruler, here. It hurts.

Interviewer: Was that in first grade?

Nicolás: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you tell your parents?

Nicolás: Yes, my dad went to talk to the teacher, but he said it wasn't true. (*Nicolás, Rural child, Older Cohort, Rioja*)

3.5 Trajectories through the education system

The possible trajectories children may follow through the school system depend on available opportunities and resources. In rural areas, there is not much choice as all schools are public and usually there is only one school per educational level. Thus, all rural children in our subsample attend the only public preschools or primary schools that are available in their village. In contrast, in urban areas there are public and private schools with different characteristics, giving parents more options. We found the following trajectories among our subsample:

No preschool — Public primary school: 2 rural children, 1 urban child (3)

Public preschool — Public primary school: 12 rural children, 7 urban children (19)

Public preschool — Private primary school: 1 urban child

Private preschool — Private primary school: 4 urban children

Whether or not these trajectories remain stable is something we would have to check over time. Parents may decide to move their children from a private school to a public one for financial reasons; or children enrolled in public schools may move to private ones if they are perceived as being better and if financial resources allow for it.

In general, there are two main reasons for choosing one type of school over another: economic resources and perception of quality (plus availability, of course). Thus in rural areas we found positive views on the school services available in the village, but when we probed this issue more deeply, it transpired that there was some recognition that educational quality is better in larger town schools, in district and provincial capitals and in urban areas in general:

Compared to the cities, education here is lower [less good]. My daughter came from a city to this village and it was a shock for her. She used to tell me, 'here they don't teach anything', and she went back to live with her grandmother in the city [...] It is not the same as in the city, it is lower. (*Mother of Carlos, Rural, Rioja*)

In the Andean rural village, it was clearer from the outset that education in the district capital was considered better:

Young Lives sibling: I studied here from first to third grade, then I went to [district capital]. In first grade the teacher taught in Quechua, sometimes in Spanish.

Mother of Héctor: That is why I moved her down there [district capital].

Young Lives sibling: Also the teacher did not check our homework. My dad complained that I did not make her review my homework. We asked her, and she said 'later', but she slept in her desk; she just stood up to write on the blackboard.

Mother of Héctor: Down there [in the district capital] is better, that is why I send them there.

Interviewer: Is Benito going to study down there too?

Mother of Héctor: He will, but who knows? We have little money, we will see.

Due to the costs involved and the distance, however, most children attend the primary school in their village. There is also a secondary school in the village, but some of the older children attend secondary school in the district capital, 30 minutes away from the village by car, which is considered better. Language is also a key factor in this case as parents consider the teaching of Spanish to be better in the district and provincial capital since most people in the school speak Spanish.

In urban areas, especially in the capital city where the range of choice is broader, perceptions of differing quality in public and private schools are expressed more explicitly, although there are different opinions on the issue.

Frankly, my children have good teachers, very good, very kind. For me, public education is good. Besides, the school is close and I can go at any time and talk with the teacher if I have any query. (*Mother of Lupe, Urban, Lima*)

I choose this [private] preschool because there are few students. The teacher performs better with fewer students. I studied in a public school and there were many students and sometimes the teacher doesn't pay attention, or gets annoyed, but here there are only a few children. (*Mother of Cesar, Urban, Lima*)

I want to put her in a private school because it is better, because, since you pay, they treat her with care and kindness. But it will depend on my [economic] situation. (*Esmeralda's mother, Urban, Lima*)

Thus, some parents consider private schools to be better, though this is not always the case and there are parents happy with public service. Criticism of public schools has to do with infrastructure (buildings and basic services are not well maintained); staff (there are good but also bad teachers); confidence in public services (there is no trust in the state capacity to improve education); assistance (too many strikes); and management (parents need to become more involved in the school to ensure it functions properly). Meanwhile, private schools are perceived as offering better quality education, parents are able to claim more as a result of the fees they pay, there are fewer students per classroom, and children have more courses and progress more in their studies than in public schools.

However, some parents acknowledge that this may vary from school to school. Quality is heterogeneous among private schools too, and access to them is conditional upon availability of economic resources. There are also prestigious public schools which are considered better than private schools, especially in the Andean city, where there is a contrast between public schools in the city centre (better) and public schools in the surrounding neighbourhoods (not so good).

4. Children's experiences of early transitions

To address children's experiences of early transitions, we worked with first graders (ten children) exploring their views on first grade and asking them to compare primary and preschool. With preschoolers (12) and those at home (two), we asked about their expectations of primary school and how they like preschool, with the idea of a subsequent visit the following year to compare their expectations with their actual experience. This section presents children's views on preschool and primary school, their likes and dislikes, and the other things they do along with going to school.

4.1 Children's general views on school and preschool

Despite the scarce institutional support for transition processes and the limited information parents have about supporting successful transitions, young children starting first grade see many positive things in school: it is place to encounter other children, to make new friends and to play with them. It is a place for learning, studying and 'working' (schoolwork). Their first impressions of school stress these characteristics and show a positive attitude towards school. Preschoolers also show a positive view of primary school and want to go there next year.

Interviewer: How was it when you came to the school for the first time? Were you scared?

Belén: We played... with Sara, Raquel, Mary and Sofi.

Interviewer: Did you know them beforehand?

Belén: No, I met them there; they are my classmates. (*Rural child, first grade, Rioja*)

Interviewer: What would you like to happen next year to you?

Carmen: Go to school.

Interviewer: What for?

Carmen: To draw, to read and write. (*Rural child, unschooled, Rioja*)

Interviewer: And why do children go to school?

Ricardo: To study, to work, to play, to sing.

Interviewer: And how do you work?

Ricardo: Nicely [...] with the A, E, I, O, U. (*Urban child, First grade, San Román*)

However, there are also things that children don't like, such as bullying and hitting among children and punishment by teachers. Corporal punishment was present in all the schools we visited. Reports of bullying among children were more frequent in the urban setting in the Andes. In rural areas, children who attend preschool are usually more familiar with each other, since they are neighbours or relatives. In urban areas, children meet with children they have never met before and this may contribute to an increased feeling of vulnerability, especially if there is violent behaviour.

Interviewer: So, your friend did not let you do your homework?

Ricardo: He was lazy [...] he was strangling me...like this [...] Today I told his mother 'he strangles me, he makes me cry,' I said to her [...] 'I will yell at him,' she said. [...]

Interviewer: When you first enter school, did you have any problems?

Ricardo: Yes, one day...they bullied me...My friend, I reported him to my teacher and now he keeps bothering me...he kicks me.

Interviewer: What other things do children do in the classroom?

Ricardo: They fight with each other! And they don't feel pain. (*Urban child, First grade, San Roman*)

4.2 Children's perceptions of differences and continuities

Children perceive or anticipate several differences between preschool and primary school. The more important one is around the axis of play/study. There are more opportunities for play in preschool than in first grade. Accordingly, there is more time for studying in first grade and less in preschool. There are also more resources for play at preschool, as represented by the presence of toys and time for playing:

Lupe: I liked that school better, there were toys...we had two breaks...there were also things for playing house.

Interviewer: Was it preschool?

Lupe: Yes.

Interviewer: And you liked it more?

Lupe: Yes, here it is not like preschool, it is like an assembly, there are not so many toys. I would like it if there were more toys here. (*Urban girl, first grade, Lima*)

Interviewer: What differences do you see between preschool and primary school? Are they alike or different?

Eva: They are different...first grade classroom does not have toys, just a few.

Interviewer: Are lessons the same?

Eva: No. (*Urban boy, First grade, Lima*)

Thus, children point out there is more play and drawing in preschool, and also that there are more toys, balls, puzzles and other things to play with. Learning corners are usually more attractive and they are allowed to play in them more. In the courtyard there may be games equipment such as slides and swings. In first grade there are no such toys and games or, if there are, they are few. Also, the time to play with them is limited and is confined to breaks, rather than being part of classroom time. Children report that in primary school they study more and do more homework. They need more notebooks and a big backpack to carry them.

Interviewer: What did you do in preschool?

Diego: I played.

Interviewer: And what do you do at school?

Diego: I study [...] Addition, subtraction. (*Urban boy, First grade, Lima*)

However, whilst most children agree that there is more play time and toys in preschool, when asked which they prefer, most chose the primary school, because they are going to learn more, to read and write and to study. In one site children even mentioned that they will become more intelligent. This shows children are keen to learn the kind of skills the school offers and have been told about their importance by their parents. They may also feel they are growing up because they are studying more than playing.

Interviewer: Do you like the [primary] school or preschool more?

Isabel: The [primary] school.

Interviewer: What do you like the most?

Isabel: We work...with [plastilina modeling clay] we also work. (*Urban child, First grade, San Román*)

Differences between pre- and primary school are also expressed in terms of activities, teachers, spaces, practices or behaviours. Children notice differences between teachers: preschool teachers are perceived as 'better', more supportive; whilst first grade teachers do things faster, go away, and do not have enough time to attend to the children individually:

Interviewer: Who was better? The first grade or preschool teacher?

Eva: The preschool teacher was better [...] because she helped us [...] [The first grade teacher] only does her job, and then she leaves us because she has to go to another school. (*Urban girl, First grade, Lima 3*)

Children seem very perceptive (in their own terms) of the different pedagogical approaches teachers follow (a more individualised treatment vs. a more 'whole class approach' style of teaching). In Andahuaylas (rural site), children reported that physical punishment is not used in preschool but is indeed used in first grade, reflecting a friendlier environment in the former.

Spaces are also different, according to children: not only are certain games and learning corners no longer present, but primary school buildings are also bigger and are usually located in another place.

Preschool is up the hill, primary school is down the hill. They are of different colours. (*Flavia, rural girl, First grade, Andahuaylas*)

My primary school is bigger [than the preschool]. (*Fabricio, Rural boy, First grade, Andahuaylas*)

Their own classmates' behaviours also change during the course of transition. For example, one child who went straight from preschool to second grade (since he was especially bright) reported that his classmates were relatively disorganised in preschool, whilst in second grade the children are more orderly. They place a positive value on this, which may be related to signs of growing up.

Interviewer: How were preschool students?

José: They were disordered. I didn't like it. I alone was quiet.

Interviewer: And the others were messing around?

José: Yes. (*Urban boy, Second grade, San Román*)

Even children still in preschool are aware that primary school will mean more responsibilities and less play. Relatives and teachers tell them they have to behave better and do more homework at school. Sources of information about primary school include preschool teachers, parents and especially older siblings.

Despite the many differences children identify between pre- and primary school, they also see some continuity between activities conducted in preschool and primary school, such as writing from the blackboard, studying and drawing. Continuities highlighted by children may reflect what some authors have called the 'schoolification' of preschool services (Woodhead and Moss 2007), since the activities reported are most common at school:

Interviewer: What do you do at school?

Fabricio: Like this, to copy from the blackboard, drawings, to copy...

Interviewer: And in preschool, what did you do?

Fabricio: I copied.

Interviewer: What else did you do in preschool?

Fabricio: We studied.

Interviewer: And in the school? Is it the same?

Fabricio: Yes. (*Rural boy, First grade, Andahuaylas*)

4.3 Children outside school: Discovering the wealth of who they are and what they do

Children are very active in finding their own ways of adapting to the new situations that starting first grade presents to them. In a way, there is limited support for this and children are very much on their own in going through this transition. At the same time, however, this is not the only transition they are experiencing, and these other changes may impact on their ability to cope with educational transitions. Indeed, according to the literature reviewed and previous research experience in rural areas, children of this age group may be experiencing changes in their roles and responsibilities, going from being 'little children' to 'grown up' children, and thus assuming progressively more responsibility for domestic and productive activities and developing skills that prepare them to be productive members of their households (Anderson 1994; Ortiz 1993; Ortiz and Yamamoto 1994; Ames 2004).

Indeed, children in the Younger Cohort participate in a great variety of everyday activities. They take care of themselves through personal care activities (such as cleaning themselves, brushing their teeth, combing their hair, etc.) and feeding themselves, but they also take care of others, particularly younger siblings. In rural areas, young children are more likely to take significant responsibility for the care of a younger sibling, feeding or cleaning him or her, whilst in urban areas young children play with younger siblings but are not so much 'in charge' of their care.

The degree of responsibility over the activities children conduct to support their families also varies between urban and rural areas. Thus, although in both rural and urban sites, we can see young children helping their mothers in domestic activities, such as helping with cooking, (e.g., peeling vegetables), cleaning the house, washing the dishes, making beds, running errands and undertaking light shopping, in rural sites these activities are seen more as children's responsibilities or duties whilst in urban areas they are seen more as the first attempts of children to participate and help, and are thus considered useful for learning but

not so much as duties. In rural areas, however, parents expect progressive participation in these activities from an early age (about 4 years old) in a way that allows almost full participation at about 7 to 8 years old, although some tasks will wait until 10 to 11 years old; whilst in urban areas full participation is expected at about 11 to 12, and children may start later (around 5 years old), as revealed by timelines developed. The notion of duty and expectations related to this are therefore present earlier in rural areas. However, this is not necessarily experienced by children as an obligation, since many of them ask to do these kinds of activities. In rural areas, where the range of domestic activities is broader (including fetching water and wood for cooking, helping with laundry and cooking, collecting grass or grinding corn for feeding and taking care of domestic animals), children are more aware that these activities are necessary for family daily life and they seem to enjoy being part of it.

Taking care of animals is an important activity both in urban and rural areas but it involves a different degree of responsibility (and indeed a different type of activity) in each one. Thus, for example, in rural areas taking care of domestic animals and pets is a daily responsibility children must fulfill, whilst in urban areas, children often have pets which they play with, but caregivers may take responsibility for their care. Caring for animals may involve feeding them in the house or nearby barnyard or taking the whole flock to graze on the outskirts of the village, an activity that children of this age do not perform alone yet, but with older siblings or their mothers. Whether children have pets or domestic animals such as hens, cows, sheep, etc., they all make it clear that their animals are very special to them.

In rural areas children are not only intensively involved in domestic activities but also in productive activities. They join their parents in their gardens and farming areas, and help to perform some activities (feeding the animals, cleaning the crops, scaring birds away from crops, digging holes in the land for sowing, etc.), whilst learning others progressively through observing others undertaking them (milking the cows, getting honey, moving the animals around pastures, sowing and harvesting, etc.).

In urban areas we found a mixed situation: in the Andean city, children also are involved in their parents' productive and economic activities, joining them in the market to help sell goods, for example. These families are of rural origin and therefore may be following the same principle observed in rural areas concerning the early participation of children in a range of productive activities. Most of them are involved in small trade and cloth making, and thus the activities themselves allow for greater child participation. In the capital city, however, young children do not perform these kinds of activities. Their parents work in places where they cannot go, and usually remain there most of the day. Thus, not only cultural traditions but also work conditions separate children from their parent's work and thus prevent participation in such activities.

Play is a common activity in the four sites for this cohort. In urban areas, however, play is largely conducted within the household, whilst in rural areas children are much freer to move around the community, although there is usually an adult around supervising them. Also, in rural areas, children not only play at 'play time' but usually mix play and work when conducting their activities, such as when going to the gardens, going to fetch water or grazing the animals. It is important to take this into account since, when asking about time use for discrete activities, the combination of play and work may be underrepresented, leading to a distorted representation (either children who work too much or children that do not work yet). In school, especially in primary school, play is a separate activity, conducted mostly during breaks but not as part of classroom time, as we have seen above.

School takes up a significant part of children's time, since they spend about five hours a day from Monday to Friday there. Homework also takes up a certain amount of time in the mornings or afternoons. However, it is clear that school is not their only activity, and certainly not the only place where they learn.

The reconstruction of children's time use depicts general patterns found in each community, but there is a range of individual variation according to several variables such as gender, family size, birth order, mother's education, etc. It is not possible to discuss in depth these variations in this document, but a sample is shown in the following vignettes contrasting situations within the same rural village.

Gabriela is a five-year-old girl attending first grade. She lives with her parents and her eight siblings. When we met her at the school grounds, she seemed very tiny and shy. However, when joining her at her home and garden, she transformed herself into a much more 'grown up' girl. For example, although she is very small and thin, she is strong enough to carry her baby brother, feed and clean him and change his clothes, something she does regularly and without anyone asking. Gabriela also helps her mother carrying water and wood for cooking, peeling vegetables, cooking rice, feeding the chickens. She plays mostly with her siblings, especially those closer in age (1.5, 4, 7, 12 and 14), either within the house or in the yard, but rarely on the streets. Gabriela enjoys going with her mother and siblings to the farming area, especially on weekends. Whilst her older siblings milk the cows and graze the flock along with her mother, she takes care of the younger ones, drinks some milk her mother offers to her, eats fruits her brother gathers from the trees and plays around. On the way back she may carry some milk or wood.

Hugo is a five-year-old boy attending preschool. He lives with his parents and his older sister. He is very sociable and energetic. Being the youngest in a small family, he is still very much cared for by his mother and sister. Most of the help with domestic activities is carried out by his 7-year-old sister. He spends most of his time playing around, usually in the street or in his friends' houses, close to his own home. His freedom of movement, however, does not mean the mother is not aware where he is, as he always informs her. Hugo does not so much like going to the farming area with his mother. He gets tired and bored and his mother has to carry him for a while, so she rather prefers not to bring him along so often.

Hugo and Gabriela are the same age and live in the same village, but are at different points in their social and educational transitions. Whilst Gabriela is eagerly and rapidly assuming more responsibilities and developing an increasing sense of autonomy, Hugo is still very much cared for by others and devotes most of his time to play. Gabriela is experiencing the transition to first grade in the midst of the process of assuming more responsibilities, and this may help her to cope with new situations and requirements. However, it may also present her with a contradictory self-image, where she is a more autonomous girl within her household but less so in an educational institution where she is at the 'beginners' stage. Hugo is still in preschool and will go to first grade next year in the company of his play and classmates, who will without doubt be a crucial support to him. However, demands of responsibility and good behaviour (including less play) may be new and difficult for him. In our next visit, we are going to look in more depth at this ongoing process of transition and the different strategies children develop to cope with it.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we attempt to examine a particular transition of early childhood, namely the beginning of primary school. In doing this, we wanted to account for different perspectives, both institutional and personal, from a variety of actors involved: teachers, parents and children themselves.

At the institutional level, we found some good news: increasing enrolment in preschool, which may facilitate the beginning of primary school, and better availability and access to educational services in both urban and rural areas. However, hidden costs still prevent universal access to preschool and there is a much greater degree of enrolment in urban than in rural areas, showing the persistence of inequities in access to services along this line.

A more worrying issue, however, relate to our findings within educational institutions. Looking at the organisational arrangements in place and the actual practices of teachers, it can be said that transition from preschool to first grade is not understood and structured as a process within and between educational institutions. This is evident in the weak (or absent) coordination and dialogue between preschool and primary teachers; in the physical and administrative separation of preschool and primary levels that keep them worlds apart from each other (although they may be just a couple of blocks away); in the lack of continuity between classroom environments, both physically (e.g., learning corners) and culturally (child-centred vs. teacher-centred approaches); in the lack of specialised training for first grade among primary teachers to foster successful transitions; and in the nonexistence of plans or programmes for the attendance of children with no preschool experience at all. Schools are not making a conscious effort to welcome children to their classrooms and ease the many changes they will face. On the contrary, schools place the heavy load of adaptation onto children's shoulders with very little organised support. At the most, teachers point to parents' role in this adaptation, but offer little or no information or guidance to parents to fulfill such a role. Exchange and communication between parents and teachers is very general and addresses issues of behaviour, general performance and specific school or classroom material needs.

On the other hand, we found that parents overall have a positive attitude towards education and there is a growing consensus about the importance of preschool as a preliminary and necessary step to prepare children for school experience. Parents identify not only specific knowledge and skill sets (such as counting and the alphabet) their children acquire in preschool, but also point to social behaviour and skills. Most children have had preschool experience, although it varies in length. Hidden costs for preschool may prevent longer attendance. Also, the fact that the state does not provide the necessary educational materials to work with makes preschool highly dependent on the income of parents and their ability to provide supplies for school. Poorer families may therefore end up with poorer educational services, since they ultimately have to fund them.

Beyond the widely-acknowledged usefulness of the preparation preschool offers, parents have scarce information on transitions, the importance of this particular transition to first grade and the ways they can support it. Only more educated mothers in Lima were able to point this out, and neither schools nor teachers seem to offer specific information on the topic.

Parents recognise differences in the quality of educational services their children attend along various lines: the village school vs. the district or provincial capital school (in rural

areas); the school in the neighbourhood vs. the school in the city centre (in the Andean city); and the private and public schools (in urban areas). We have traced different trajectories along this last line, finding that most children attend public schools but some attend private ones. These trajectories may evolve in the future and thus we will keep track of them. A key issue in attending 'better' schools is economic resources. Private schools are more expensive than public, but it is also expensive to send a child to the district or provincial capital to study, even in a public school, due to the costs involved. The considerable variety of educational services and their quality is clearly apparent to parents.

Coming back to the issue of fostering transitions, after looking at the scarce institutional support that exists and the limited information parents have in general, we found that, in this context, the main burden of adaptation is left to children: they are the ones that have to go through this transition and make sense of it with little guidance or support. However, they show a very positive attitude to this transition and the capacity to cope with it. They also clearly identify the differences between preschool and primary school characteristics, from teachers to spaces, from activities to educational approaches. Children see this step towards primary education as an opportunity to learn and they certainly feel they are growing. Informally, they are also increasing their participation in other family activities, and this may be a source of strength for coping with educational transitions. However, despite this positive attitude, this transition is not necessarily easy for them and implies a degree of stress, especially when facing certain forms of violence, such as bullying, hitting and physical punishment at home and school. These practices have been widely criticised, but the fact they are still present demands a better strategy for improving children's educational experiences, especially when starting school. Moreover, starting school deserves much more attention from policy makers and educators in order to take best advantage of the positive attitude emerging among parents and children themselves.

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Young Lives is an innovative long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty.

The project seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

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Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Jo Boyden.

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Save the Children UK
(staff from the Rights and Economic
Justice team in London as well as staff
in India, Ethiopia and Vietnam).

Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

Department of International Development
University of Oxford
3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751
Fax: +44 (0)1865 281801
Email: younglives@younglives.org.uk

www.younglives.org.uk